

SMALL FARMERS AND DEVELOPMENT

March 1994

Summary

Small farmers throughout the developing world exhibit common characteristics, but some commonly held views regarding these characteristics are invalid. Small farmers are not distinguishable from other rural poor; there is no essential difference in attitudes between “landless” and “land-owning” poor. Their economic aspirations fit a consistent five-level hierarchy. They will take no risks that could drop them to a lower level but will take big, though calculated, risks to strive to a higher level. Subject to these risk considerations, they are eager to enter the market economy, innovate, and take risks appropriate to their situation. Successful small farmers will ensure that some of their children acquire the education or skills to move beyond small farming.

Background

Concerned that USAID might not adequately reflect social science research findings in program designs, CDIE financed a study in 1989 to draw lessons from the sociological and anthropological literature for its small-farmer activities. The study, carried out by Dr. Kenneth Kusterer of the Sociology Department of American University, identified several thousand studies and selected 268 that met the study criteria of relevance and reliance on direct observation rather than surveys or questionnaires. The resulting set embraced a wide range of disciplines and virtually the full range of cultural settings and agricultural practices. The results of this study, entitled *Small Farmer Attitudes and Aspirations* (July 1989), are the basis for this summary. CDIE and the author agreed that additional study and testing would be needed to “defend with assurance” the study report.

Findings

- ! **Rural households exhibit a set of common characteristics.** The distinction between “landowning” and “landless” is irrelevant in analyzing attitudes and aspirations of rural households. Almost all have access to some land, and almost no household engages exclusively in farming its own land as its only economic activity. Economic activities are production of goods and services

for the household's own consumption, cash-crop farming, self-employed nonagricultural business activities, and off-farm labor. Most rural households are "mini-conglomerates" that engage in all four types of activity. This diversification is one means used to ensure stability and potential for expansion of income.

- ! **The household, not the farm, is the proper focus for analysis.** In parts of Africa, where residential, food-production, and consumption units differ, it is the latter that should be considered the household for analytical purposes.
- ! **Small farmers' economic aspirations fit a five-level motivational hierarchy, with attitude toward risk a central feature.** Failure to understand the hierarchy and individual households' standing in it has been responsible for some significant failures by development agencies. Small farmers take very conservative attitudes about risks that might push them lower in the hierarchy; their first concern is to avoid a lower status. If current status is secure, however, they are willing to take large, though calculated, risks to move to a higher level. The challenges facing the household vary at each of the five stages of the hierarchy, as follows:
 - ! **Escape from subordination to external authority** is one of the major achievements of the last half-century. Today, few of the world's small farmers live as slaves, serfs, or perpetually indebted tenants. However, subordination within the household continues to prevail, particularly for women.
 - ! **Establishment of a viable household** is a common situation and is experienced by each new generation of small farmers as they come of age. A new household needs capital assets to establish and sustain itself. Land reform or resettlement programs that attempt simultaneously to form cooperatives and other collective arrangements seldom succeed because these small farmers are preoccupied with the viability of their households. Efforts to interest them in cash crop production activities are also unlikely to succeed, because they have other priorities and the risks entailed threaten the survival of the household.
 - ! **Ensuring economic security for the lifetime of the household** follows. Once a household has assured its viability, it begins a search for security through diversification, usually independent cash income sources for adult household members as well as higher productivity agriculture. Family members may earn income by home processing of agricultural products for market sale, production of nonagricultural products, or off-farm employment. With independent sources of income for each adult, households next seek to expand the most promising of these enterprises. The availability of credit, marketing opportunities, or off-farm employment is useful to farmers at this stage. Experimentation with cash crops as a means of moving to the next level also occurs at this stage.
 - ! **Establishment of security for the next generation** is next. Reaching this level requires the household to acquire enough capital and productive earning opportunities to ensure both that the household can continue to prosper after the next generation leaves and that this new generation can start with sufficient capital to avoid spending most of its working life in level two. These households are likely to experiment with nonagricultural pursuits in their efforts to move to level five.

- ! **Ensuring higher living standards for the next generation.** A level 5 household typically has access to economic activity that promises a much higher return in wages or profits than is needed for subsistence. Most of the income comes from commercial farming or from nonfarming sources. Sufficient capital is accumulated to give greater opportunity for advancement—either in the form of additional education beyond the norm for the locality or the establishment of a nonfarm enterprise that can be passed on. At this stage, the household has effectively ceased being small and poor; it has become middle-class by local standards.

Management Implications

- ! **Economic growth is compatible with small farmers' goals and development.** Small farmers showed no evidence of being unalterably tied to traditional production modes or their domestic economies. When opportunities for entering into cash economies and raising themselves in the hierarchy became available, they seized the opportunities. They voluntarily endured great sacrifices and disruptive transitions to escape being “small farmers.”
- ! **Development practitioners need to understand the local scene .** Broad participation in design and implementation of projects is important as a means for ensuring that interventions are appropriate to local circumstances, particularly the level in the motivational hierarchy that is prevalent.
- ! **The poorest farmers need capital assets, not credit.** Farmers struggling at levels 1 and 2 have little labor available beyond that needed for establishing a viable household. Their largest need is for capital assistance that will free hours of labor time and thus allow their labor to become more productive. Grants for community infrastructure projects, such as small-scale irrigation or potable water, can help increase household productivity.
- ! **Women benefit when small farm households prosper.** Patriarchal household organization is characteristic of all small-farm societies, but women are fully participating and decision-making members. As mothers-wives in their own households, women are in far stronger positions than they are in patriarchal “extended households,” where they are subordinate to both matriarchs and patriarchs. Women in households at higher levels of the hierarchy make sacrifices to ensure that they become less dependent on the domestic economy and more economically independent of their spouses. Usually, helping the household helps women in that household.

! **Rural income-generating projects are very helpful for small-farmer development.** While small farmers are willing to migrate temporarily to obtain income, opportunities to earn income where they live are preferred. Consequently, any project that expands and diversifies income opportunities in small farm localities is a small-farmer development project. Agribusiness activities that provide such opportunities can be ideal projects.